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What is Hindu Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism is an easily discernable phenomenon in belief-oriented religions like Christianity and Islam which have a simple and exclusive pattern to their faith. They generally insist that there is only One God, who has only one Son or final Prophet, and only one true scripture, which is literally God's Word. They hold that belief in this One God and his chief representative brings salvation in an eternal heaven and disbelief causes condemnation to an eternal hell. Muslims daily chant "there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his (last) prophet." Most Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, regard belief in Christ as one's personal savior as the only true way to salvation.

Fundamentalists are literalists in these traditions who hold rigidly to their beliefs and insist that since their religion alone is true the other religions should not be tolerated, particularly in the lands where members of their religion are in a majority. Fundamentalists generally hold to their religion's older social customs and refuse to integrate into the broader stream of modern society which recognizes freedom of religious belief.

Fundamentalism can usually be discriminated from orthodoxy in these traditions, but tends to overlap with it, particularly in the case of Islam. Most orthodox Christians and many orthodox Muslims tolerate those of other religious beliefs, though they may not agree with them, and are not involved in the militancy and social backwardness of fundamentalist groups. They usually have little trouble functioning in modern society, though they may keep to themselves in matters of religion and still regard that their's is the only true religion. The strictly orthodox in these religions, however, may not be very different than the fundamentalists and often support them.

While the new media of the Western World, and of India itself, speaks of Hindu fundamentalism, no one appears to have really defined what it is. Is there a Hindu fundamentalism comparable to Islamic or Christian fundamentalism? Using such a term merely assumes that there is, but what is the evidence for it? Are there Hindu beliefs of the same order as the absolute beliefs of fundamentalist Christianity and Islam? It is question able that, whatever problems might exist in Hinduism, whether fundamentalism like that found in Christianity or Islam can exist at all in its more open and diverse tradition which has many names and forms for God, many great teachers and Divine incarnations, many sacred books and a pursuit of Self-realization that does not recognize the existence of any eternal heaven or hell. There is no monolithic faith called Hinduism with a set system of beliefs that all Hindus must follow which can be turned into such fundamentalism.

Fundamentalist groups insist that their's is the only true God and that all other Gods or names for God are wrong. Islamic fundamentalists insist that the only God is Allah, and will not accept Hindu names like Brahman or Ishvara, even though these also refer to a Supreme Being and Ultimate Spiritual Reality such as Allah is supposed to be. Christian fundamentalists will not accept

Allah or Brahman as names for God as they conceive Him to be. Hindus with their many names and forms for God don't mind accepting the Christian name God or even Islamic Allah as referring to the same reality, though they may not use these names in the same strict or exclusive sense as Christians or Muslims. A belief in God is not even necessary to be a Hindu, as such non-theistic Hindu systems as Sankhya reveal. For those who speak of Hindu fundamentalism, we must ask the question: What One God to Hindu fundamentalist groups insist upon is the only true God and which Gods are they claiming are false except for him? If Hindus are not insisting upon the sole reality of the One Hindu God can they be called fundamentalists like the Christians and Muslims?

Islamic fundamentalists consider that Islam is the only true religion, that no true new faith can be established after Islam and that with the advent of Islam all previous faiths, even if they were valid up to that time, became outdated. Christian fundamentalists hold that Christianity alone is true, and that Islam and Hinduism are religious of the devil. Even orthodox people in these traditions may hold these views.

Hindus are not of one faith only. They are divided into Shaivites (those who worship Shiva), Vaishnavas (those who worship Vishnu), Shaktas (those who worship the Goddess), Ganapatas (those who worship Ganesh), Smartas and a number of other groups which are constantly being revised relative to modern teachers around whom new movements may be founded (like the Swami Narayan movement, the Ramakrishna Vivekanda groups or the followers of Sri Aurobindo). Those called Hindu fundamentalists are similarly divided up into these different sects. What common belief can be found in all these groups which constitutes Hindu fundamentalism? What common Hindu fundamentalist platform do the different sects of Hinduism share? Is it a Shaivite, Vaishnava or other type fundamentalism? How do such diverse groups maintain their harmony and identity under the Hindu fundamentalist banner? While one can make a code of belief for Christian or Islamic fundamentalism, what code of belief applies to Hindu fundamentalism of all different sects?

No Hindus - including so-called Hindu fundamentalists insist that there is only one true faith called Hinduism and that all other faiths are false. Hinduism contains too much plurality to allow for that. Its tendency is not to coalesce into a fanatic unity like the fundamentalists of other religions, but to disperse into various diverse sects and fail to arrive at any common action, historically even one of self-defense against foreign invaders.

Fundamentalists groups insist upon belief in the literal truth of one book as the Word of God, which they base their behavior on. Muslim fundamentalists insist that the Koran is the Word of God and that all necessary knowledge is contained in it. Christian fundamentalists say the same thing of the Bible. Again even orthodox or ordinary Muslims and Christians often believe this. Hindus have many holy books like the Vedas, Agamas, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana and so on, which contain a great variety of teaching and many

different points of view and no one of these books is required reading for all Hindus. Hindus generally respect the holy books of other religions as well. What single holy book do Hindu fundamentalists hold literally to be the word of God, which they base their behavior upon? Christian and Islamic fundamentalists flaunt their holy book and are ever quoting from it to justify their actions. What Hindu Bible are the Hindu fundamentalists all carrying, quoting and preaching from the finding justification in?

Fundamentalist groups are often involved in conversion activity to get other people to adopt their beliefs. They frequently promote missionary efforts throughout the world to bring the entire world to their views. This again is true of ordinary or orthodox Muslims and Christians. Fundamentalists are merely more vehement in their practices. What missionary activities are Hindu fundamentalists promoting throughout the world? What missions do other countries have? Hindu fundamentalists set up to convert Christians, Muslims or those of other beliefs to the only true religion called Hinduism? What Hindus are motivated by a missionary spirit to discredit people of other religious beliefs in order to convert and save them?

Fundamentalist groups not only condemn those of other beliefs to an eternal hell, they may even make death threats against those who criticize their beliefs. The fatwa of the Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie and of some others against Anwar Shaikh (a name not so well known but not untypical) are examples of this, which many Muslim groups throughout the world, perhaps the majority, have accepted. What Hindu has ever condemned non-Hindus to an eternal hell, or issued declarations asking for the death of anyone for merely criticizing Hindu beliefs? Where have Hindus ever stated that it is punishable by death to criticize Krishna, Rama or any other great Hindu leader? There are certainly plenty of books, including many by Christians and Muslims, which portray Hinduism in a negative light. How many of such books are Hindu fundamentalists trying to ban, and how many of their authors are they threatening?

Fundamentalists are usually seeking to return to the social order and customs of some ideal religious era of a previous age. Fundamentalists often insist upon returning to some traditional law code like the Islamic Sharia or Biblical law codes, which are often regressive by modern standards of justice and humanitarianism. What law code are Hindu fundamentalists seeking to reestablish? Which Hindu groups are agitating for the return of the law code of the Manu Samhita, for example (which incidentally has a far more liberal and spiritual law code than the Sharia or the Bible)?

Fundamentalists are usually opposed to modern science. Many Christian and Islamic fundamentalists reject the theory of evolution and insist that the world was created by God some 6000 years ago. Even in America Christian fundamentalists are trying to have this theory taught in the public schools and would like to have the evolution theory taken out. What scientific theories are Hindu fundamentalists opposed to and trying to prevent being taught in schools today?

Fundamentalism creates various political parties limited to members of that religion only, which aims at setting up religious dictatorships. What exclusively Hindu religious party exists in India or elsewhere in the world, and what in its common Hindu fundamentalist platform? Who is asking for a Hindu state that forbids the practice of other religions, allows only Hindu religious centres to be built and requires a Hindu religious figure as the head of the country? This is what other fundamentalist groups are asking for in terms of their religions and what they have instituted in a number of countries that they have taken power, like Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Fundamentalism is often involved with militancy and sometimes with terrorism. What Hindu minorities in the world are violently agitating for their separate state? What planes have Hindu fundamentalists hijacked, what hostages have they taken, what bombs have they planted? What terrorist activities are Hindu fundamentalists promoting throughout the world? What countries are stalking down Hindu fundamentalist terrorists who are plotting against them? The Ayatollah Khomeini is regarded in the Western world as a typical example of an Islamic fundamentalist militant leader. Many Western people consider him to be terrorist as well. What Hindu fundamentalist leader has a similar record?

Saudi Arabia is usually regarded as a pious or orthodox Islamic country, and is usually not called fundamentalist even by the news media of India. No non-Islamic places of worship are allowed to be built there. No non-Islamic worship is allowed in public. American troops in the Gulf War had to hide their religious practices so as not to offend the Saudis. Traditional Islamic law, including mutilation for various offences, is strictly enforced by a special religious police force. If we apply any standard definition of fundamentalism, Saudi Arabia is a super fundamentalist country. What Hindu community is insisting upon the same domination of one religious belief, law and social practices like that of Saudi Arabia? Which Hindus are more fundamentalist in their beliefs and practices than the Saudis, whom few are calling fundamentalists?

Hence we must ask: What are Hindus being accused as fundamentalists for doing? Is it belief in the unique superiority of their religion, the sole claim of their scripture as the Word of God, their savior or prophet as ultimate for all humanity, that those who believe in their religion go to an eternal heaven and those who don't go to an eternal hell, the need to convert the world to their beliefs? These views are found not only in Christian and Islamic fundamentalist statements of such nature. Can we imagine any Hindu swearing that there is no God but Rama and Tulsidas is his only prophet, that the Ramayana is the only true scripture, that those who believe differently will be condemned by Rama to eternal damnation and those who criticize Tulsidas should be killed?

Hindus are called fundamentalists for wanting to retake a few of their old holy places, like Ayodhya, of the many thousands destroyed during centuries of foreign domination. Several Hindu groups are united around this cause. This,

however, is an issue oriented movement, not the manifestation of a monolithic fundamentalism. It is a unification of diverse group to achieve a common end, not the product of a uniform belief system. Even the different groups involved have often been divided as to how to proceed and have not spoken with any single voice. Whether one considers the action to be right or wrong, it is not the manifestation of fundamentalism. It may be the awakening of a number of Hindus socially and politically but it is not the assertion of any single or exclusive religious ideology. If it is fundamentalism, what is the fundamentalist ideology, belief and practice behind it? Hindus, alone of all people, have failed to take back their holy sites after the end of the colonial era. If they are fundamentalists for seeking to do so, then what should we call Pakistan or Bangladesh, who have destroyed many Hindu holy sites and were not simply taking back Islamic sites that the Hindus had previously usurped?

Hindus are called fundamentalists for organizing themselves politically. Yet members of all other religions have done this, *while Hinduism is by all accounts the most disorganized of all religions*. There are many Christian and Islamic parties throughout the world, and in all countries where these religions are in a majority they make sure to exert whatever political influence they can. Why shouldn't Hindus have a political voice even in India? The Muslims in India have their own Muslims party and no one is calling them fundamentalists for organizing themselves politically. There are many Islamic states throughout the world and in these Hindus, if they exist at all, are oppressed. What Hindu groups are asking for India to be a more strictly Hindu state than Muslims are doing in Islamic states?

There are those who ward that Hindu rule would mean the creation of a Hindu theocratic state? Yet what standard Hindu theology is there, and what Hindu theocratic state has ever existed? Will it be a Shaivite, Vaishnava, or Vedantic theocracy? What Hindu theocracy model will be base upon? Is there a model of Hindu kings like the Caliphs of early Islam to go back to, or like the Christian emperors of the Middle Ages? What famous Hindu king was a fundamentalist who tried to eliminate all other beliefs from the land or tried to spread Hinduism throughout the world by the sword? Does Rama or Krishna provide such a model? Does Shivaji provide such a model? If no such model exists what is the fear of militant Hindu theocratic rule based upon?

Traditional Hindus do exist. There are Hindus who are caught in conservative or regressive social customs, like untouchability or mistreatment of women, which should not be underestimated. There are serious problems in Hindu society that must be addressed, but these should be examined as per their nature and cause, which is not some uniform Hindu fundamentalism but wrong practices that are often contrary to real Hindu thought. To lump them together as problems of Hindu fundamentalism fails to examine them adequately but, rather, used them as a scare tactic to discredit Hinduism as whole. There are some Hindus who may believe that their religion is superior and want to keep it separate from other religions. In this regard they are no different than orthodox Christians, and Muslims.

The fact is that there is no monolithic fundamentalism possible among Hindus who have no uniform belief structure. A charge of social backwardness and discriminatory attitudes can be made against a number of Hindus but this is not the same as the blanket charge of fundamentalism, which misinterprets Hinduism as a region of militancy which it nowhere is. The charge of fundamentalism is usually made against various Hindu groups like the VHP (Viswa Hindu Parishad), who do not support the caste system and other such backward customs anyway.

What is called Hindu fundamentalism is in fact generally a reaction of Islamic, Christian and Communist fundamentalisms, which are all organised according to an exclusive belief system and a strategy to take over the world. These three fundamentalisms are attacking India from within, as well as threatening it from without. Islamic terrorist activity continues in India, particularly in Kashmir. India is now surrounded by self-proclaimed Islamic states where Hindus, have become second class citizens. Under this circumstances why should it be so wrong for Hindus in India to consider creating a state that defends them? What other country is willing to defend the rights or traditions of Hindus? Christian and Islamic missionary activity continues strongly in many parts of India. Do these missionary groups portray Hinduism as a valid religion in its own right? They are sometimes not even teaching respect for India as a nation as the separatist agitation they create once their members become a majority in a region reveals.

Hinduism is a supertolerant religion. No other religion in the world accepts such a diversity of beliefs and practices or is so ready to acknowledge the validity of other religions. The idea of the unity of all religions was practically invented by modern Hindus like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Gandhi. As Hinduism is a supertolerant religion, even a little intolerance among Hindus is regarded as Hindu fundamentalism. And the charge of intolerance can be used to discredit Hindu groups, who are extremely sensitive to such a negative portrayal.

Throughout history Islam and Christianity, owing to the exclusive nature of their beliefs, have been generally intolerant religions (though there have been notable exceptions). They have not accepted the validity of other religious particles, and contain in themselves little diversity as compared to Hinduism. What Christian or Muslim leaders proclaim that all religions are one or that Hindu and Buddhist have as valid a religion as they do (and therefore do not need to be converted)? As these religions are generally intolerant, their members have to be superintolerant to be called fundamentalist.

Hindus often have a double standard in region that work against them. They try to tolerate, accept or even appreciate exclusivism, intolerance and fundamentalism when practiced by those of other regions beliefs. For example, which Hindus are criticizing the far more obvious fundamentalism and exclusivism among Christians and Muslims? Meanwhile any criticism by Hindu of other religions, even when justified, may be regarded by other Hindu as

intolerance. In addition, many Hindus, particularly of the modern socialist-communist variety, brand even pride in Hinduism as fundamentalism.

Another related term that we meet with in the Indian press today is that of “Hindu Chauvinism”, though terms such as “Christian chauvinism” or “Islamic chauvinism” do not occur in either the Indian or the Western press. Chauvinists believe in the special superiority of their particular group. This term is used mainly relative to white chauvinists, those who think that whites are genetically better than dark-skinned people, or in the case of male chauvinists or those who think that men are inherently better than women. Hindus may praise their religion, and Hindus often use flowery and exaggerated language to praise things, but few if any Hindus are claiming that Hindus own the truth and that those of other background of beliefs cannot find it. Christians and Muslims routinely believe that only members of their religion go to heaven and everyone else, particularly idol worshipping people like Hindus, go to hell. Which Hindu chauvinists have similar ideas? The Vatican recently told its monks and nuns not to experiment with Yoga and Eastern forms of religious practice, which is branded as selfish, false and misleading. Should we not therefore call the pope a Christian chauvinist religious leader? Yet Hindus who are more tolerant than it may be designated in such a manner.

Hindus are not only not chauvinistic they are generally suffering from a lack of self-esteem and an inferiority complex by which they are afraid to really express themselves or their religion. They have been beaten down by centuries of foreign rule and ongoing attempts to convert them. The British treated them as racially inferior and both Christians and Muslims treated them as religiously perverted. That some Hindus may express pride in their religion is a good sign and shows a Hindu awakening. Unfortunately the groups who may be challenged by this awakening have labelled this pride chauvinistic. Naturally some Hindu groups may express this pride in an excessive way, just as happened with the Black pride idea in America during the civil rights movement, but this is only an attempt to counter a lack of pride and self-respect, it is hardly the assertion of any enduring cultural militancy and does not have the history like the fundamentalism of Christianity and Islam, which goes back to the early years of these faiths.

Such terms as “fundamentalist” and “chauvinist” are much less applicable to Hinduism than to other religions and generally a great exaggeration. They are a form of name calling, and do not represent any clearly thought out understanding. It is also interesting to note that many of the people who brand Hindus in this light are often themselves members of more exclusivist ideologies, which have an agenda to gain world-domination and to take over India.

This does not mean that Hindus should not be criticized. Certainly they can be criticized for many things. They have to really look at who they are and what they are doing because in most cases they are not living up to their inner potential or their heritage. On a social level many Hindus are trapped in

backward social customs, but those who are not backward are usually caught in the corruption or materialism of modern society. On an inner level Hindus suffer from lack of creativity, initiative, and original thinking. They want to imitate either their own older thinkers, whose teachings may not be entirely relevant today, or, if modern, they imitate the trends of Western culture which are unspiritual. As a group Hindu mainly suffer from passivity, disunity, and a lack of organization, and they are very poor at communicating who they are to the world as a whole. Relative to their own religion their main problem is that they fail to study, practice or support it, or to defend it Hindu teachings are misrepresented or if Hindus are oppressed.

These are not the problem of an aggressive or militant fundamentalism but the opposite, that of people who lack faith and dedication to themselves and their traditions. Hindus are not in danger of being overly active and militant but of remaining so passive, resigned, and apologetic that they are unable to function as a coherent group of speak with a common voice about any issue. They have been very slow even to defend themselves against unwarranted attack, much less to assert themselves or attack other. There is no danger of a monolithic or dictatorial fundamentalism in India, like in Iran or Saudi Arabia. The danger is of a divided and passive religion that leaves itself prey to external forces and thereby gradually disintegrates. A little more activity among Hindus, almost whatever it might be, would be a good sign as it shows that they are not entirely asleep! To brand such activity, which is bound to be agitated at first, as fundamentalist because it causes this sleep to be questioned is a mistake.

In this regard Sri Aurobindo's insight may be helpful (Indian's Rebirth. P. 177). He said, "The Christians brought darkness rather than light. That has always been the case with aggressive religions - they tend to overrun the Earth. Hinduism on the other hand is passive, and therein lies its danger".

It is time Hindus stopped accepting wrong designations and negative stereotypes of their wonderful religion. Certainly aspects of Hinduism need to be reformed, and Hindus are not all required to agree with each other or accept any set religious dogma, but there is very little in this beautiful religion that warrants such debasing terms as fundamentalism and chauvinism. If we look at the aspects which are commonly ascribed to religious fundamentalism we find little of them even among so called Hindu fundamentalists.

Hindus who accuse other Hindus of being fundamentalists should really question what they are saying. What is the fundamentalism they see, or is it merely a reaction of the oppression that Hindus have passively suffered for so long? Are the people making the charge of fundamentalism themselves following any religious or spiritual path, or is it a political statement of non-religious people against religion? If Hindus are becoming intolerant and

narrow-minded they should be criticize for being poor Hindus, not for being fundamentalist Hindus, as true Hinduism has a universal spirit.

As a long as Hinduism is devalued and misrepresented we must expect some Hindus to take a stand against this in one way or another. Other Hindus should not simply criticize them if the stand they take may be one-sided. Hindus must try to defend Hinduism in a real way, not simply concern those who may not be defending it in a way that they think is not correct. This requires projecting a positive Hindu spirit, the yogic spirit, that can attract all Hindus and turn their support of the tradition in a spiritual direction. It requires not condemning other Hindus who are struggling to uphold the tradition as they understand it to be, but arousing them to the true spirit of the religion.

To routinely raise such negative stereotypes as fundamentalists or even fascist relative to Hindu groups, who may only be trying to bring some sense of unity or common cause among Hindus, is a gross abuse of language. What Hindus need is to wake up and unite, to recognize their common spiritual heritage and work together to manifest it in the world today, just as modern teachers like Vivekanda and Aurobindo encouraged. Such teachers did no speak of Hindu fundamentalism. They recognized Hindu backwardness but sought to remedy it by going to the core of Hindu spirituality, the spirit of unity in recognition of the Divine in all, not by trying to cast a shadow on Hinduism as a whole.

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